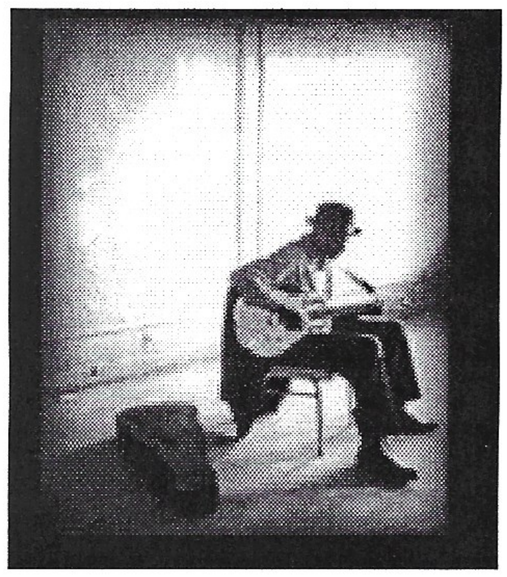

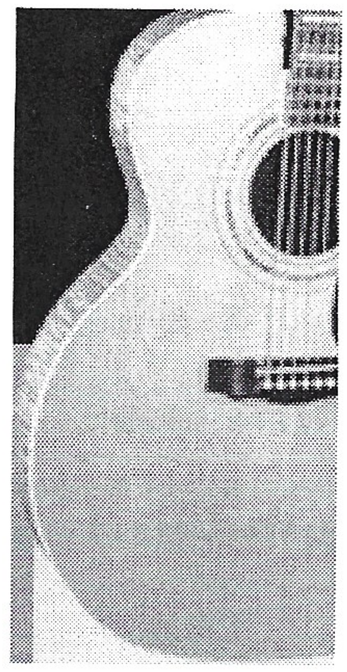

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Keb Mo: World's happiest bluesman wears Big Wide Grin (part 1)

By Dan McCue

It's an uncommon musician who can claim an equal footing in the seemingly disparate worlds of acoustic blues and Martha Stewart, but then Epic recording artist Keb Mo never set out to be your typical singer-songwriter.

A decade after taking a break from a lucrative career as a studio musician and immersing himself first-hand in the blues and culture of the Mississippi Delta, the Los Angeles native, whose given name is Kevin Moore, leads what by almost any measure is a charmed life.

In addition to the four critically acclaimed albums he has to his credit – two of them garnering Grammies – Keb Mo is an enormously popular concert performer who dabbles time and again in television whenever his busy schedule permits.

Though he tours almost constantly, often with friends Bonnie Raitt, Lyle Lovett and Jackson Browne, the 50-year-old musician has appeared on CBS' Touched By An Angel, PBS' Sesame Street, Sessions on West 54th Street and Austin City Limits, and with the aforementioned doyen of domesticity on Martha Stewart Living.

(He also composed "Martha's Theme" for the latter program and more recently, his "Come On Back" was incorporated into a Victoria's Secret advertising campaign.)

But it's "family" music that's filling Moore's time at the moment, a theme that makes his latest album, Big Wide Grin, a subtle departure from his past projects.

"Sony Wonder (one of Epic's sister labels) does a lot of projects aimed at families and approached me a while ago about doing a children's record," Moore said recently from the West Coast office of this record company.

"But I said I didn't want to do a children's record. I don't really like children's records," he laughed. "I didn't want to sing a bunch of goofy little songs – but I agreed maybe a couple would be okay. You know what I mean?"

Not wanting, in his words, to "play down or talk down" to children, Moore set his sights instead on making a "family" album that would just "kind of grove along" in a family setting.

One, he hoped, that could be put on and "everybody can kind of have something."

The result is an album of music for real people of all ages, from the empowering "everybody Be Yoself" to the poignant, "I Am Your Mother Too."

More than anything, Moore said, "I wanted to depicted family life as it really is, not as some ideal that no one ever really achieves."

To accomplish that goal, Moore assembled an eclectic collection of original and borrowed compositions, including Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi," Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely," Sly and the Family Stone's "Family Affair," and even the O'Jay's "Love Train."

"I did songs that I could relate to and that had an impact on me growing up," Moore said. "And when I say, 'growing up,' I don't just mean from the age of say, 4, into my teenage years, but well into my 20s. Everything on this album just really hit some kind of spark with me."

"'Big Yellow Taxi' is a very profound song, a very pertinent song, and yet I guess you can say I approach it in a way, a child-like way, that everybody can understand," he continued. "The same with 'family affair' by Sly Stone."

Asked what touches off that "Spark," Moore said a song's got to have a story to tell for him to want to record it.

"It's got to have a message that's positive, useful. Positive in that it gives healing," he said. "Like 'Love Train.' It's a real simple song that talks about love. Love for your fellow man. Simple concepts."

"'I Am Your Mother Too'? More love. It's about love within a family. The alternative family. The adoptive family. 'Family affair' ... is about the dysfunctional family."

Moore laughs.

About Dan McCue
Dan McCue is presently the environmental/government reporter for The Stuart News, a daily newspaper in South Florida. Prior to getting into the "serious" news business, Dan covered the arts and entertainment for a number of publications. Over the years that's required him to interview a number of blues and soul greats including John Lee Hooker, Willie Dixon, and the Neville Brothers. He continues to write about the music business on a freelance basis.

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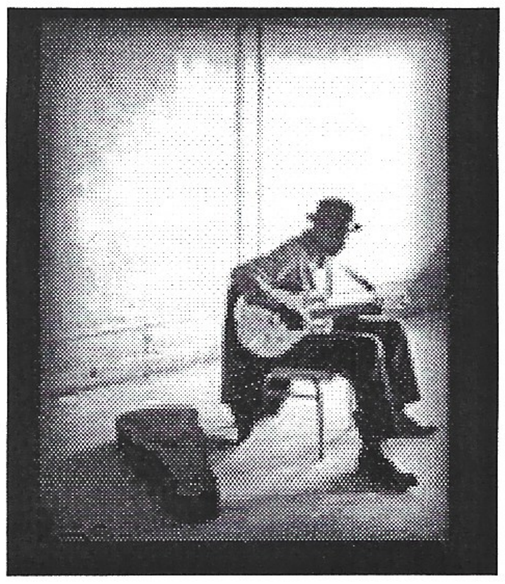

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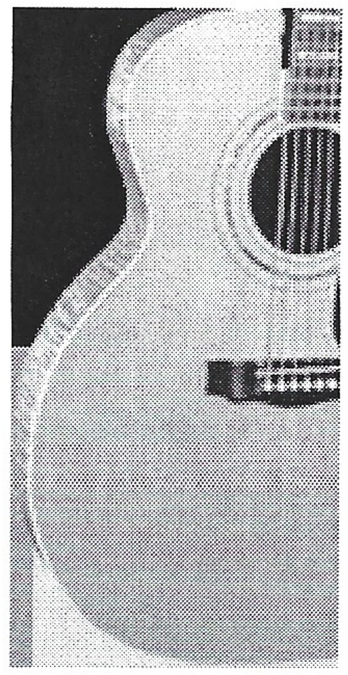

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Keb Mo: World's happiest bluesman wears Big Wide Grin (part 2)

By Dan McCue

The album also contains such unusual turns as a cover of the "Flat Fleet Floogie," a jive-era paean to a woman of ill repute made famous by Slim Gaillard and Slam Stewart, and a flawless rendition of "America The Beautiful" recorded months before the tragedies of Sept. 11.

Moore said as daunting as some past performances of these covered tunes have been, he went into the studio unconcerned about comparisons.

"I know I'm an imposter, but I don't care," he laughed. "Ray Charles nails everything. Stevie Wonder nails everything. Sly Stone. All the covers that I did were nailed by the people that did them first."

"But in a sense, the fact that they were nailed doesn't nullify the fact they are great songs and have a message to deliver," he continued. "So I said, 'Let's just take the fancy performances away, and let's just rethink them and do them in a way that mortal man (beginning to chuckle) can do them."

"To me I represent the regular guy singing songs. Maybe I don't have the greatest voice in the world. My pitch is always a little shaky. But to me, that's okay. I am the regular guy."

Regular guy or not, Kevin Moore came to the blues by a somewhat circuitous route.

Early in his career he spent several years with Papa John Creach, best known as violinist for the early Jefferson Starship and for Hot tuna, and opened concerts for the likes of John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra and Loggins and Messina.

Throughout the 1970s, Moore worked in a variety of styles of music – including a stint with a club band covering others Top 40 hits – and played numerous recording sessions while also beginning to make a name for himself as a songwriter.

His first solo album, entitled rainmaker, came out on the Chocolate City label, a division of Casablanca Records.

Three years later, after a stint with the vocal group The Rose Brothers, he began performing at the LA nightspot Martha's Memory Lane with the Whodunit Band, an ensemble of ace blues players. Monk Higgins, producer for Bobby "Blues" Bland, led the group, and its lead guitarist became one of Moore's early mentors.

His real springboard into the blues, however, came in 1990 through a Los Angeles theater production entitled Rabbit Foot.

The producers needed an African-American Delta bluesman and, ironically, Moore had just begun exploring the stylings of Robert Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy. The production brought the musician a few more roles in similar projects.

"So I took a hiatus for a while and just got into the blues," Moore said.

In short order he was jamming with Albert Collins and Big Joe Turner, Pee Wee Crayton and Jimmy Witherspoon, and was developing his own style as a blues guitarist.

Enthralled by the grit and bite of the country blues, Moore began concentrating increasingly on solo acoustic work and then made his way to Mississippi to hang out with veteran Delta bluesman Eugene Powell.

Moore described the impetus behind his musical journey this way:

"I always tried to write and I always tried to play, but what happened was, one day I just became real comfortable with myself and stopped judging myself," he said. "I stopped worrying about what I couldn't do and just worried about what I could do."

"The thing about it is ... what's wonderful about the path I've followed ... is that it's possible," Moore continued. "That's what's wonderful about it. That no matter wherever you start from, you can take the time and go somewhere else. You can go to where you want to go."

After releasing his self-titled debut on Epic Records in 1994 – an album that garnered him the first of his eight W.C. Handy awards, this one for best acoustic blues artist – Moore was typecast as a Delta-blues revivalist.

But from the start, there was always a lot more going on in his music than that.

On that album and the four that have followed, Moore's trademark has been to imbue his blues with positive messages; heartfelt sentiments delivered with authenticity and integrity.

"I'm not going to worry about things I can't change," he sang on "Muddy Water," the lead track on 1998's Slow Down album.

"I'm going to keep that smile on my face/I'm going to make myself a better man," he sings on "A Better Man," from the same album.

Two years later, when his album The Door was released, the positivity continued to flow.

"I found out the door is always open," he sang on the tile track.

The title of another track was even more to the point. It was called simply, "Stand Up (And Be Strong)."

Moore said those lyrics are part and parcel of his metaphysical approach to life.

"It's kind of like the place where science and religion meet," Moore said, explaining what he meant.

"It's the place where you are manifesting your life's dreams with your mind; it's believing that everything that's in your life is created through your thoughts and your actions."

"I'm always thinking about some crazy stuff," he laughed.

"Also, I work very hard to make sure everything I do is coming out of actual experience," Moore said after a moment. "Everything is real. And I try to share it. I don't try to teach or preach; you know what I mean? I like to share the feelings."

For a blues guy, Moore seemed quite the happy man.

"Who me?" he laughed. "I'm in denial."

Moore laughed again.

"It's a choice. I mean, my choice is to be as happy as I can possibly be. To be present in the moment, I mean, I don't want to be sad. Basically ... I want the sun to shine."

"As far as being a blues artist, I know it's kind of a conflict," he said between peals of laughter. "You're supposed to be whining and screaming and moaning about something – I do a little whining in there – but always with the sense that it's an opportunity to heal. I try to use it for an opportunity to do that."

Just this past summer, Moore garnered a second W.C. Handy Award as best acoustic blues artist.

In addition to Big Wide Grin, Moore appears, singing "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," on the just released Hank Williams tribute record – other artists on the album include Bob Dylan, Jeff beck and Sheryl Crow – and he's also recorded a Shakespeare sonnet for a compact disc benefiting the Royal academy of Dramatic Arts.

He's also featured on an American roots music documentary series currently airing on PBS.

Asked what his expectations are for his current release, Moore said he hasn't any.

"I have no expectations. My hope is," he said, beginning to laugh. "I hope that people will just enjoy it. I hope, with all my albums, that in some kind of way they enhance life just a little bit."

And what's the best part of the life that Kevin Moore, a.k.a. Keb Mo, leads.

"All of it. I enjoy it all. It's all good," he said.

About Dan McCue
Dan McCue is presently the environmental/government reporter for The Stuart News, a daily newspaper in South Florida. Prior to getting into the "serious" news business, Dan covered the arts and entertainment for a number of publications. Over the years that's required him to interview a number of blues and soul greats including John Lee Hooker, Willie Dixon, and the Neville Brothers. He continues to write about the music business on a freelance basis.

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